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Two things strike me as I bite into an overly hot piece of sausage on my Healthy Choice pizza. One, I haven't eaten meat in seven years and, two, that's Ian Beller on *Wheel of Fortune*. I'm only watching *Wheel of Fortune* because the remote control came up missing and my television's been stuck on the same channel for three days. It's gone off on some handy household instrument pilgrimage, meditating and eating fresh papayas with my rechargeable flashlight and sweater de-pillier. Anyway, Ian is on freaking *Wheel of Fortune* and I've seen him naked.

Ian's not a game show kind of guy. Not even *Family Feud* or *Press Your Luck* reruns. We tried to watch *Big Brother*, but that turned into an hour of him pissing on Americans for taking perfectly good British television and turning it into a microcosm of snively, whiny human pathos. Regardless, he held back this playful side of him. I know

he was always looking for a way to make a quick buck, but this is ridiculous. One would think you'd have a better shot of finding a sugar mommy than spinning the wheel.

Ian watches the introduction of his first opponent looking totally blissed out, and even throws in a zealous nod of agreement when Pat Sajak says he's glad to have her here. She's large and blonde and Pat flatters her even though she spends too much time going on about her beautiful daughters, who are eleven and eight years old. She also has a wonderful and adoring husband named Alan, who is waiting to jump out of his seat and crash the stage if she solves the final puzzle. They'll cause a great scene; these big people, grabbing each other around the neck, skipping in circles, trying to rope a faux-scared Pat into their huggy-fest. He loves looking into the camera with those big scared eyes saying, "I had no idea they'd react this way to a motor home!" Vanna, dear Vanna—her only moves are touching illuminated rectangles and clapping politely and saying "Buh bye!" when Pat pulls her string. Poor girl's been doing this so long she probably believes her fingers really make those letters appear. Imagine her, in those sequin adorned dresses, looking like a stretched out disco ball walking around the grocery store, hesitant to reach for a can of peaches or jar of salsa for fear of leaving a trail of current events or historic battles.

A friendly black lady is Ian's other opponent. If she had been my third-grade teacher, I'd be better at math and wouldn't have made Nicole Ames cry on a regular basis. She smiles sincerely at Pat while telling America about her fulfilling work at a non-profit women's shelter and her twelve-year marriage to a wonderful man named Marcus. She licks her lips a lot. Ian's enamored by this friendly black lady, offering her a smile reserved, as far as I know, for his cat, Bean and warm beer. I find it hard to believe that

only those with beautiful children and wonderful husbands make it to Wheel, as if they haven't been blessed with enough luck already?

What does Ian have to offer about himself? As far as I know he lacks both requirements.

Pat smiles and reads off his card, "Ian Beller from Seattle, Washington. Tell us about yourself, Ian."

"Hi Pat, I'm a dickhead from England, residing in the rainy Northwest, where I divide my time between making grown women cry and cooking a mean shepard's pie."

"Well good luck to you, Ian. Ready to play?"

Ian's always ready to play. We met outside a Laundromat, where I was exiled after I tried washing my dog's favorite rug in my building's machine. Who knew there are size restrictions on those things? I was looking to bum a cigarette and asked if he smoked. He did, but felt the need to explain he smoked only socially. Social smokers piss me off, the way they can straddle the line between good and evil. His explanation should have been my first clue Ian wasn't big on labels. The way he described himself as a "social smoker" made him sound like his lighting up in the company of the addicted was like one of the Hilton sisters showing up at your birthday party.

He offered one up and I took it, but then remembered I didn't smoke anymore. I have a nasty tendency to forget I've given up things that were hard to give up and go back to them. I held on to Ian's cigarette for twenty-three minutes, the length of time it takes to run through a spin cycle, before he asked for it back even though he had at least half a pack.

"If you're not going to smoke it," he said.

It's Ian's turn to spin. Somehow the large blonde lady has \$700. The sweet black lady has \$0. Ian lands on \$250. He claps his hands like he's just been offered his own sports franchise.

"I'll take a 'T.'" Typical Ian. Don't ask; just take. He gets one too. "I'll spin."
\$800 this time. "How about an 'R'?"

He may as well be ordering the foot-long meatball meal deal, he's so confident it's up there. And damn it, Vanna gives it to him. Don't be fooled I want to yell at her! Is she sticking her boobs out at him? Bitch. I wouldn't be surprised if she had her eye on Ian. No doubt that's what got him on the show. He's aesthetically pleasing and charming as a puppy dog.

"How 'bout an 'S.'" *Just give me that 'S.' That one, right there.*

He's up to \$1,800 and gets to keep all that money. Flat-out cash is way better than tacky, overpriced merchandise from the Wheel store. "*I'll take the ceramic elephant trivet set for \$600 please.*" It was a bigger rip-off than Sky Mall.

He should buy a vowel, but of course there's no way he'll do that. Ian won't spend money if he doesn't have to. And most likely he won't have to. He used to brag about how he went four months in college without buying groceries, simply by attending AA meetings for the coffee and cookies.

Is Vanna licking her lips? She is. My God, she is!

After that first meeting, Ian and I did laundry together for the next twenty-four

Saturday afternoons. Even though my building machines were repaired and my area rug transgression long since forgiven, I opted for the laundromat and Ian's company. Our dirty wares became intimate long before we did. Rather than spend the buck fifty on a full load Ian, would often throw his washcloths and gym socks in with my PJs and underwear. No regard for separation of garments. Why exactly did I like this guy? Oh yes. What Ian lacked in chivalry he made up for in kissing. Ian and I could make out for hours, touching each other only with our lips, teeth, or fingertips. If we went further I almost felt disappointed. It was well worth a buck fifty.

Ian's up to \$3,200 and he's pumped.

"I'd like to solve the puzzle, Pat. 'Carpet Store.'"

The music! The polite applause from his opponents. Nice black lady licks her lips and smiles at him. Vanna is clapping too loudly. She might as well wet her fingertip and rub her surgically enhanced nipples. My ex is wanted by an aging TV co-host. He could buy her a new breast with his earnings or a stainless steel refrigerator with a filtered water mechanism. They'll make quite a story—Vanna and the hottie, British contestant. They'll be invited to the Golden Globe Awards and *US Weekly* will interview me. "I always thought his fingernails were somewhat long for a man and he seldom changed his sheets but boy what a kisser!"

The happy black woman spins first in the next round. Bankrupt. She's starting to get pissed, making that innocent "shucks" arm gesture, but her eyes betray her readiness to rip the wheel off its hinges. She has no money.

Blondie loses out to an elusive 'P'. Ian gets his turn back. *Buy a vowel you*

cheapskate motherfucker! For someone whose moniker is two-thirds vowels he gives them very little regard. But why waste his hard-earned money on something that could potentially benefit his competition? Vanna sure gives him her attention. She'll be all over him if he wins that Range Rover. In fact, I hope he does win the Range Rover instead of the \$25,000, or the trip to Greece because he despises SUVs. Especially SUVs piloted by yuppie moms on cell phones. He'll never admit he *tried* to get that Ford Explorer to hit him by speeding up to an intersection.

I don't like yuppie moms either, but only because they're usually the stay-at-home types who get to order linens and Christmas decorations from catalogs and bring Sunny-D and store-bought cookies wrapped in tissue paper to Johnny's sixth-grade class. Who wraps cookies in tissue paper? Who has time for that?

But I was riddled with guilt when he laid on his Toyota Corolla's horn, scaring the SUV mom into such a frenzy I could see the veins on her neck pitch forward. Her hands blocked her neatly designed eyelids to avoid witnessing her own irresponsibility. It wasn't her fault. I told him this too, but he mumbled something under his breath that sounded remarkably like "Stupid bitches." Odd, being there was only one so-called bitch driving.

Piss Face losses his turn to the two-bell signal signifying time is running out so Pat must give the wheel a final spin. All consonants are worth \$900. Vowels are worth nothing. Ian gets to choose first.

"A 'T', Pat?"

"Two 'T's, Ian," Pat says. "Shh, shh," he says to the audience. "Five seconds to

solve the puzzle.”

Doot Doot.

The black lady licks her lips several times and stares at the dim rectangles before her with such mad desire she could tear those mysterious letters from their skins like a pack of wolves on lamb chops.

“‘N’?”

“Two ‘N’s.”

Doot Doot.

Blondie goes next. “An ‘R’, please.”

I like her. She says please.

“One ‘R’,” says Pat. No “shh shh” this time. That’s right. Only shut up for Ian.

Doot Doot.

“‘D’.” As in Demanding. As in Depreciating. As in Dickhead.

“One ‘D’ coming up for Ian. *Shh Shh.*”

Doot Doot.

“How about an ‘A’?” Nice black lady asks.

Dumbass! Don’t buy him an ‘A’. Next thing you know you’ll be buying him a winter coat and paying his way through grad school.

Still anyone’s game.

“A ‘B’?” Blondie asks.

“Ooh, no ‘B’.” Pat says this like he’s saying, “Ooh, plaid with gingham? I don’t think so.”

Ian. “I’d like a ‘C’, Pat.” I bet you would, you little snake-eyed bag of cow dung.

"Five seconds," Pat says.

"I'd like to solve the puzzle," Ian says with a smile.

"Yeah, OK," Pat says, 'cause of course Ian would solve it.

He pauses. Announces like a teenager in his first Shakespearian drama.

"Canadian Tourist."

The damn music!

Ian was never a hearts-and-flowers kind of guy. At best he'd come over equipped with his own bag of chips, planning to drink the beer in my fridge left over from more generous guests. What did we talk about on those nights? Government conspiracy theories (him,) which *Big Brother* houseguest should be ousted next (me), or Ian's only other real interest—his cat, the sole reason Ian stayed in America. "Bean can't handle six months of quarantine and I can't handle six months without him."

Like most things, Ian was stingy with information about himself, and that made him more mysterious. I knew he was from England, but with Ian's accent that much could be ascertained by the grocery bagger at Safeway he regularly scolded for packing imbalanced sacks. He had a sister, not close in age to him, with two children. He is unsure of their ages. He came to America on scholarship to Georgia Tech, hated it but developed an affinity for the Northwest after seeing an IMAX film on the eruption of Mount St. Helens. Ian knew I was from Upstate New York, worked nine-to-five at some marketing job, and would always take his calls ranging from "What is the name of your dentist?" to "Do you think Bean's depressed?" He also knew my two weaknesses; chocolate-flavored rice cakes and mysterious foreign men highly accomplished at

kissing.

There is no time left for another round, so adding up the totals it looks like Ian is today's big winner. Blondie is hugely disappointed that Alan won't be running onto the set in a frenzy, and the black woman has let go of all pretence and is visibly pissed off because she leaves with absolute zilch. Pat apologizes to her with all the sincerity a bouncer at a popular club would apologize to you for not being on the list. He and Vanna have become transparent. Ian smiles, laughs, and stares at America like he's seeing his bride for the first time walking down the aisle. Women everywhere are rooting for him, wishing he'd take them on the cruise through the Panama Canal he could win. We break for commercial.

We broke for real. Ian had a habit of taking off for a few days at a time, sometimes even a week, with no advance warning. If he was going to be gone longer than three days he'd call, telling me to get his spare key from the landlord and check in on Bean, and make sure he gets those tuna-flavored Pounce cookies he's so fond of. When four Ian-less days rolled by one week I worried. It wasn't like him to not provide for Bean, and as far as I knew there wasn't anyone else he trusted with the cat. I skipped my manicure in favor of checking on Bean. I admit to caring more about how thankful Ian would be, how much closer to the girlfriend sphere I'd be orbiting than his dirty, spoiled kitty. Before I had a chance to ring the landlord, I caught sight of Ian dumping his trash. He whistled the theme to *I Dream of Jeannie* as he walked the path to his front door. He barely missed a beat when he saw me.

“You should learn to use a phone,” I said.

“You should learn to take a hint,” he said.

I don't want to watch *Wheel* anymore but I have to because the stupid remote deserted me. Talk about government conspiracies. I could be watching a *Simpson's* rerun. Or a Tide commercial. Or nothing and read a book. I don't care to see Ian ever again, let alone care if he wins an over-gassed truck. Anyway it's so easy to win now that they give you the six most popular letters. I bet there's a fashion show on the *Style* channel. I close my eyes. Damn it, I have to watch. There he is picking a powder blue envelope from the WHEEL Prize Platter. Pat shushes the crowd; Vanna gives him his gimme letters, 'R', 'S', 'T', 'L', 'N', 'E', and her phone number. Ian picks three more letters and a vowel. It's a *Place*.

“C, B, M and A, Pat,” Ian commands.

In spirit Pat commands Vanna to flip more letters. He hushes the crowd, says Ian's got a little bit of help here and *talk it out*. “Don't forget, *talk it out*.”

I can't believe what I'm seeing.

LA_N_R_MAT

The timer begins, and I intend shut it off before his smug voice shouts out the key to his grand prize. But something stops me, keeps me rooted to my chair for ten fabulous seconds. It's the sweet sound of. . . nothing. Ian Beller doesn't know the answer. He does not *talk it out*; he doesn't even move his lips or take his eyes from the taunting letters before him. *Doot Doot*. It's over. He didn't get it. A collective “Awwwww” emits from the audience. Pat looks shocked. We probably share the same expression. They

practically gave him every letter. If I didn't see him solve 'Carpet Store' and "Canadian Tourist" I would hedge a guess he was illiterate. Even Vanna is disgusted. She looks at him like he just farted during an aria at the opera. I laugh a little, then realizing how good it feels, a little more until I'm having a difficult time breathing, which makes me laugh harder.

"Well, I'm sorry Ian," Pat says and together with the audience shouts
"Laundromat!"

Ian's upset but manages to still look cute. He's kind of gleaming, like he meant to lose. Like he let the insecure, uncoordinated Wheel win just this once.

"I can't believe I missed that one," he says with a big smile. "I met my girlfriend at a laundromat!"

Oh that's rich! Pat and Vanna and the audience love that. Met his girlfriend at the very place that kept him from the contents of the blue envelope. His *girlfriend*?

"She may never let you forget this," Pat says which leads in nicely to revealing what is in the envelope. "She may never let you forget *this* either." Pat holds up the words RANGE ROVER and wears a sour look on his face.

Ian smacks his hands against his forehead. "I love Range Rovers!"

OK, maybe I was wrong, and this guy happens to have the same name as Ian, same inflections, same crooked front teeth, chicken pox scar on his right cheekbone, even the same navy blue blazer with the elbow patches, but he's not *my* Ian. This guy wants soccer-playing kids and misses his girlfriend. He's Ian-lite—my Ian without all the cancer causing additives.

"But you played a great game and are leaving with a lot of great prizes," Pat

continues. Vanna has been cued to start waving and shouting "buh bye" to the camera. Pat and Ian shake hands again. They seem to like each other. Pat will probably give him the Range Rover anyway. Pat and Vanna flank imposter Ian. They smile at me and wave.

"Goodbye!"

Ian waves like a munchkin bidding Glenda the Good Witch farewell. "Bye!" He mouths to his TV audience.

How could I have kissed that man? His big, nasty, ill-kempt teeth and forehead shiny enough Vanna could check her lipstick on it. And where'd all his hair go? I'm really laughing now. And who was watching the evil kitty while Master was humiliating himself on national TV?

A very valuable lesson could be learned from a man who hasn't changed his hairstyle in twenty-one years and his glittery, toy sidekick.

"Like Pat always says," I say to the rolling credits. "Should have talked it out, Ian. Always talk it out."

The End